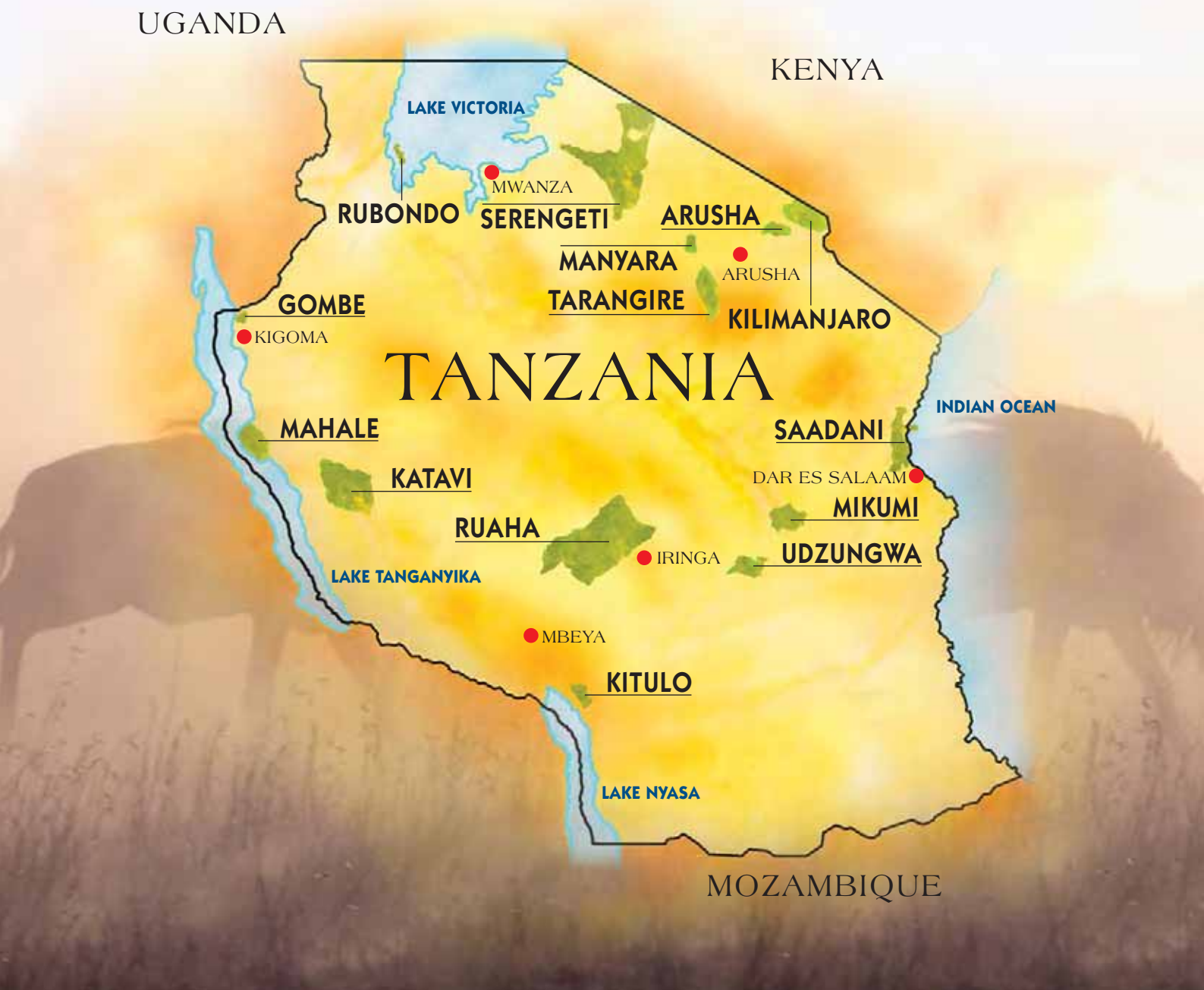
TANZANIA

NATIONAL PARKS

English

The Tanzania Experience

Can any one mental snapshot encapsulate the Tanzanian experience? Thousands upon thousands of wildebeest that march in mindless unison on the annual migration through the Serengeti, perhaps? Or a family of elephants wading across the wide, muddy Rufiji/Tarangire River? What about a pride of well-fed lions sunbathing on the grassy floor of the majestic Ngorongoro Crater? Certainly, it is such images that tend to spring to mind when one thinks of Tanzania. And properly so!



Tanzania, truly, is a safari destination without peer. The statistics speak for themselves: an unparalleled one-quarter of its surface area has been set aside for conservation purposes, with the world-renowned Serengeti National Park and incomprehensibly vast Selous Game Reserve heading a rich mosaic of protected areas that collectively harbour an estimated 20 percent of Africa's large mammal population.

And yet there is more to Tanzania than just safaris. There is Mount Kilimanjaro and Meru, respectively the highest and fifth-highest peaks on the continent. And Lakes Victoria, Tanganyika and Nyasa, the three largest freshwater bodies in Africa. Then, of course, there is the magical 'spice island' of Zanzibar, the highlight of a vast Indian Ocean coastline studded with postcard-perfect beaches, stunning offshore diving sites, and mysterious mediaeval ruins.

It doesn't stop there. Rising from the sandy shores of Lake Tanganyika, the forested Gombe Stream and Mahale Mountains National Parks vie with each other as the best place in the world to track wild chimpanzees. Closer to the coast, the isolated massifs of the underpublicised Eastern Arc Mountains have been dubbed the 'African Galapagos' in recognition of their wealth of endemic plants and animals. And Tanzania's daunting natural variety is mirrored by a cultural diversity embracing 120 distinct tribes: from the iconic Maasai pastoralists of the Rift Valley, to the Arab-influenced Swahili of the coast, to the Hadzabe hunter-gatherers of Lake Eyasi.

So, how to define the experience offered by a country with highlights as unique and diverse as Kilimanjaro, Zanzibar, Lake Tanganyika, Serengeti and Selous? An experience that might for some entail long days hiking in sub-zero conditions on the upper slopes of Africa's most alluring peaks; for others a once-in-a-lifetime safari followed by a sojourn on an idyllic Indian Ocean beach; for others still the thrill of eyeballing habituated chimpanzees, or diving in the spectacular offshore reefs around Mafia, or backpacking through the time-warped ports and crumbling ruins of the half-forgotten south coast?

Well, the one thing that does bind Tanzania's diverse attractions is, of course, its people, who take justifiable pride in their deeply ingrained national mood of tolerance and peacefulness. Indeed, Tanzania, for all its ethnic diversity, is practically unique in Africa in having navigated a succession of modern political hurdles – the transformation from colonial dependency to independent nation, from socialist state to free-market economy, from mono-partyism to fully-fledged democracy - without ever experiencing sustained civil or ethnic unrest.

Tanzania has also, over the past 20 years, emerged from comparative obscurity to stand as one of Africa's most dynamic and popular travel destinations: a land whose staggering natural variety is complemented by the innate hospitality of the people who live there. How to define the Tanzanian experience? Surprisingly easy, really. It can be encapsulated in a single word, one that visitors will hear a dozen times daily, no matter where they travel in Tanzania, or how they go about it: the smiling, heartfelt Swahili greeting of "Karibu!" – Welcome!

Gerald Bigurube

Director General

Tanzania National Parks

Arusha

The closest national park to Arusha town – northern Tanzania's safari capital – Arusha National Park is a multi-faceted jewel, often overlooked by safarigoers, despite offering the opportunity to explore a beguiling diversity of habitats within a few hours.

The entrance gate leads into shadowy montane forest inhabited by inquisitive blue monkeys and colourful turacos and trogons – the only place on the northern safari circuit where the acrobatic black-and-white colobus monkey is easily seen. In the midst of the forest stands the spectacular Ngurdoto Crater, whose steep, rocky cliffs enclose a wide marshy floor dotted with herds of buffalo and warthog.

Further north, rolling grassy hills enclose the tranquil beauty of the Momela Lakes, each one a different hue of green or blue. Their shallows sometimes tinged pink with thousands of flamingos, the lakes support a rich selection of resident and migrant waterfowl, and shaggy waterbucks display their large lyre-shaped horns on the watery fringes. Giraffes glide across the grassy hills, between grazing zebra herds, while pairs of wide-eyed dik-dik dart into scrubby bush like overgrown hares on spindly legs.

Although elephants are uncommon in Arusha National Park, and lions absent altogether, leopards and spotted hyenas may be seen slinking around in the early morning and late afternoon. It is also at dusk and dawn that the veil of cloud on the eastern horizon is most likely to clear, revealing the majestic snow-capped peaks of Kilimanjaro, only 50km (30 miles) distant.

But it is Kilimanjaro's unassuming cousin, Mount Meru - the fifth highest in Africa at 4,566 metres (14,990 feet) – that dominates the park's horizon. Its peaks and eastern footslopes protected within the national park, Meru offers unparalleled views of its famous neighbour, while also forming a rewarding hiking destination in its own right.

Passing first through wooded savannah where buffalos and giraffes are frequently encountered, the ascent of Meru leads into forests aflame with red-hot pokers and dripping with Spanish moss, before reaching high open heath spiked with giant lobelias. Everlasting flowers cling to the alpine desert, as delicately-hoofed klipspringers mark the hike's progress. Astride the craggy summit, Kilimanjaro stands unveiled, blushing in the sunrise.

Arusha National Park

Size
137 sq km (53 sq miles).

Location
Northern Tanzania, northeast of Arusha town.

Getting there
An easy 40-minute drive from Arusha. Approximately 60 km (35 miles) from Kilimanjaro International Airport. The lakes, forest and Ngurdoto Crater can all be visited in the course of a half-day outing at the beginning or end of an extended northern safari.

To do
Forest walks, numerous picnic sites; three- or four-day Mt Meru climb - good acclimatisation for Kilimanjaro.

Best time
To climb Mt Meru, June-February although it may rain in November. Best views of Kilimanjaro December-February.

Accommodation
A lodge, two rest houses, camp sites, two mountain huts inside the park; two lodges at Usa River outside the park and many hotels and hostels in Arusha town.

Gombe

An excited whoop erupts from deep in the forest, boosted immediately by a dozen other voices, rising in volume and tempo and pitch to a frenzied shrieking crescendo. It is the famous 'pant-hoot' call: a bonding ritual that allows the participants to identify each other through their individual vocal stylisations. To the human listener, walking through the ancient forests of Gombe Stream, this spine-chilling outburst is also an indicator of imminent visual contact with man's closest genetic relative: the chimpanzee.

Gombe is the smallest of Tanzania's national parks: a fragile strip of chimpanzee habitat straddling the steep slopes and river valleys that hem in the sandy northern shore of Lake Tanganyika. Its chimpanzees – habituated to human visitors – were made famous by the pioneering work of Jane Goodall, who in 1960 founded a behavioural research program that now stands as the longest-running study of its kind in the world. The matriarch Fifi, the last surviving member of the original community, only three-years old when Goodall first set foot in Gombe, is still regularly seen by visitors.

Chimpanzees share about 98% of their genes with humans, and no scientific expertise is required to distinguish between the individual repertoires of pants, hoots and screams that define the celebrities, the powerbrokers, and the supporting characters. Perhaps you will see a flicker of understanding when you look into a chimp's eyes, assessing you in return - a look of apparent recognition across the narrowest of species barriers.

The most visible of Gombe's other mammals are also primates. A troop of beachcomber olive baboons, under study since the 1960s, is exceptionally habituated, while red-tailed and red colobus monkeys - the latter regularly hunted by chimps – stick to the forest canopy. The park's 200-odd bird species range from the iconic fish eagle to the jewel-like Peter's twinspots that hop tamely around the visitors' centre. After dusk, a dazzling night sky is complemented by the lanterns of hundreds of small wooden boats, bobbing on the lake like a sprawling city.

Gombe Stream National Park

Size
52 sq km (20 sq miles), Tanzania's smallest park.

Location
16 km (10 miles) north of Kigoma on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in western Tanzania.

Getting there
Kigoma is connected to Dar and Arusha by scheduled flights, to Dar and Mwanza by a slow rail service, to Mwanza, Dar and Mbeya by rough dirt roads, and to Mpulungu in Zambia by a weekly ferry. From Kigoma, local lake-taxis take up to three hours to reach Gombe, or motorboats can be chartered, taking less than one hour.

To do
Chimpanzee trekking; hiking, swimming/snorkelling; visit the site of Henry Stanley's famous "Dr Livingstone I presume" at Ujiji near Kigoma, and watch the renowned dhow builders at work.

Best time
The chimps don't roam as far in the wet season (February-June, November-mid December) so may be easier to find; better picture opportunities in the dry (July-October and late December).

Accommodation
1 new luxury tented lodge, as well a self-catering hostel, guest house and campsites on the lakeshore.

NOTE
Strict rules are in place to safeguard you and the chimps. Allow at least 2 days to see them - this is not a zoo so there are no guarantees where they'll be each day.

Katavi

Isolated, untrammelled and seldom visited, Katavi is a true wilderness, providing the few intrepid souls who make it there with a thrilling taste of Africa as it must have been a century ago. Tanzania's third largest national park, it lies in the remote southwest of the country, within a truncated arm of the Rift Valley that terminates in the shallow, brooding expanse of Lake Rukwa.

The bulk of Katavi supports a hypnotically featureless cover of tangled brachystegia woodland, home to substantial but elusive populations of the localised eland, sable and roan antelopes. But the main focus for game viewing within the park is the Katuma River and associated floodplains such as the seasonal Lakes Katavi and Chada. During the rainy season, these lush, marshy lakes are a haven for myriad waterbirds, and they also support Tanzania's densest concentrations of hippo and crocodile.

It is during the dry season, when the floodwaters retreat, that Katavi truly comes into its own. The Katuma, reduced to a shallow, muddy trickle, forms the only source of drinking water for miles around, and the flanking floodplains support game concentrations that defy belief. An estimated 4,000 elephants might converge on the area, together with several herds of 1,000-plus buffalo, while an abundance of giraffe, zebra, impala and reedbuck provide easy pickings for the numerous lion prides and spotted hyena clans whose territories converge on the floodplains.

Katavi's most singular wildlife spectacle is provided by its hippos. Towards the end of the dry season, up to 200 individuals might flop together in any riverine pool of sufficient depth. And as more hippos gather in one place, so does male rivalry heat up – bloody territorial fights are an everyday occurrence, with the vanquished male forced to lurk hapless on the open plains until it gathers sufficient confidence to mount another challenge.

Katavi National Park

Size
4,471 sq km (1,727 sq miles).

Location
Southwest Tanzania, east of Lake Tanganyika. The headquarters at Sitalike lie 40km (25 miles) south of Mpanda town.

Getting there
Charter flights from Dar or Arusha. A tough but spectacular day's drive from Mbeya (550 km/340 miles), or in the dry season only from Kigoma (390 km/240 miles). It is possible to reach Mpanda by rail from Dar via Tabora, then to catch public transport to Sitalike, where game drives can be arranged. If travelling overland, allow plenty of time to get there and back.

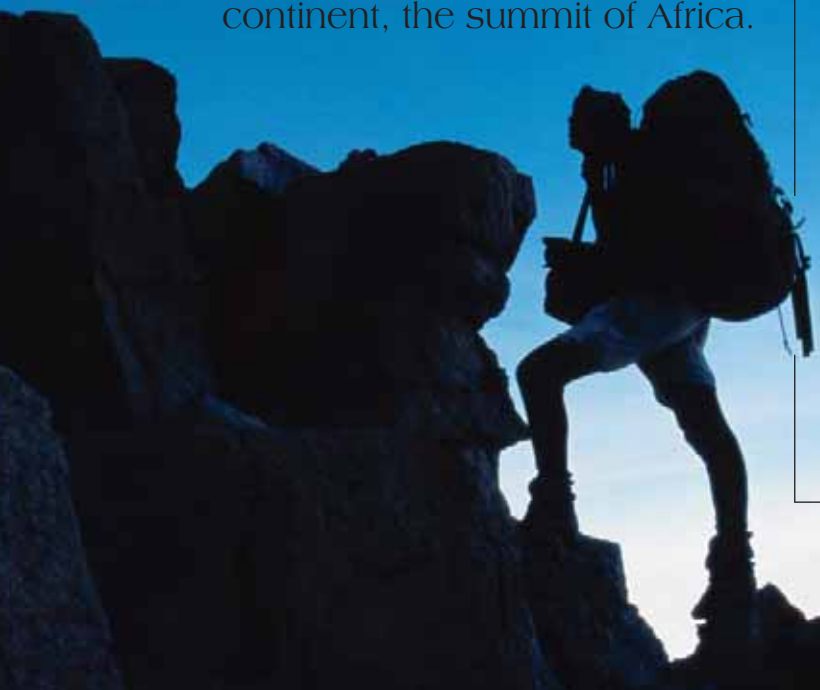
To do
Walking, driving and camping safaris. Near Lake Katavi, visit the tamarind tree inhabited by the spirit of the legendary hunter Katabi (for whom the park is named) - offerings are still left here by locals seeking the spirit's blessing.

Best time
The dry season (May-October). Roads within the park are often flooded during the rainy season but may be passable from mid-December to February.

Accommodation
One seasonal luxury tented camp overlooking Lake Chada. A resthouse at Sitalike and campsites inside the park. Basic but clean hotels at Mpanda.

Kilimanjaro

Kilimanjaro. The name itself is a mystery wreathed in clouds. It might mean Mountain of Light, Mountain of Greatness or Mountain of Caravans. Or it might not. The local people, the Wachagga, don't even have a name for the whole massif, only Kipoo (now known as Kibo) for the familiar snowy peak that stands imperious, overseer of the continent, the summit of Africa.



Kilimanjaro, by any name, is a metaphor for the compelling beauty of East Africa. When you see it, you understand why. Not only is this the highest peak on the African continent; it is also the tallest free-standing mountain in the world, rising in breathtaking isolation from the surrounding coastal scrubland – elevation around 900 metres – to an imperious 5,895 metres (19,336 feet).

Kilimanjaro is one of the world's most accessible high summits, a beacon for visitors from around the world. Most climbers reach the crater rim with little more than a walking stick, proper clothing and determination. And those who reach Uhuru Point, the actual summit, or Gillman's Point on the lip of the crater, will have earned their climbing certificates. And their memories.

But there is so much more to Kili than her summit. The ascent of the slopes is a virtual climatic world tour, from the tropics to the Arctic. Even before you cross the national park boundary (at about 2700m), the cultivated footslopes give way to lush montane forest, inhabited by elusive elephant, leopard, buffalo, the endangered Abbot's duiker, and other small antelope and primates. Higher still lies the moorland zone, where a cover of giant heather is studded with otherworldly giant lobelias. Above 4,000m, a surreal alpine desert supports little life other than a few hardy mosses and lichen. Then, finally, the last vestigial vegetation gives way to a winter wonderland of ice and snow – and the magnificent beauty of the roof of the continent.

Mount Kilimanjaro National Park

Size
755 sq km (292 sq miles).

Location
Northern Tanzania, near the town of Moshi.

Getting there
128 km (80 miles) from Arusha. About one hour's drive from Kilimanjaro airport.

What to do
Six usual trekking routes to the summit and other more-demanding mountaineering routes. Day or overnight hikes on the Shira plateau. Nature trails on the lower reaches. Trout fishing. Visit the beautiful Chala crater lake on the mountain's southeastern slopes.

When to go
Clearest and warmest conditions from December to February, but also dry (and colder) from July-September.

Accommodation
Huts and campsites on the mountain. Several hotels and campsites outside the park in the village of Marangu and town of Moshi.

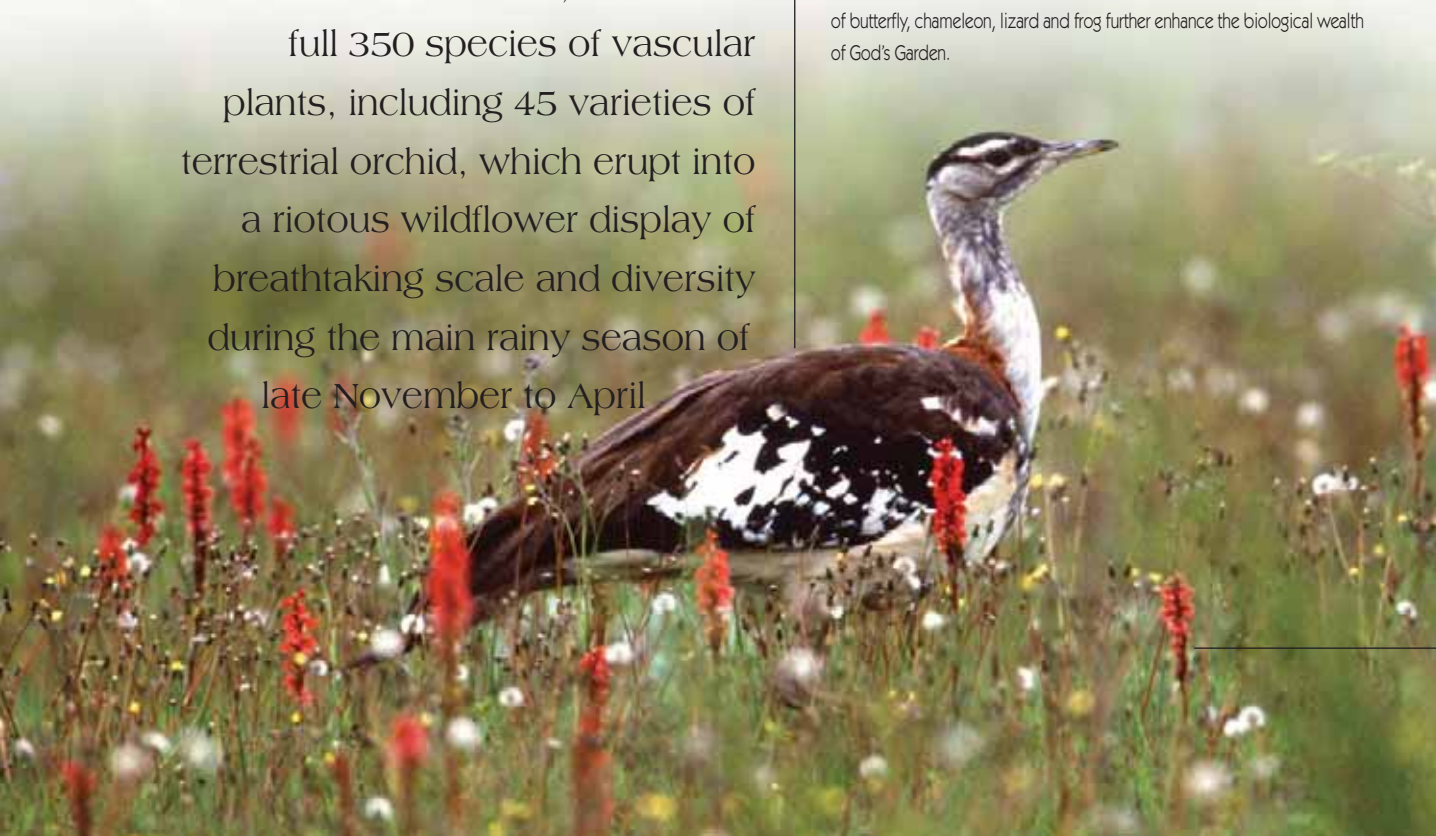
NOTE:
Climb slowly to increase your acclimatisation time and maximise your chances of reaching the summit. To avoid altitude sickness, allow a minimum of five nights, preferably even more for the climb. Take your time and enjoy the beauty of the mountain.

Kitulo

Locals refer to the Kitulo Plateau as Bustani ya Mungu - The Garden of God – while botanists have dubbed it the Serengeti of Flowers, host to 'one of the great floral spectacles of the world'. And Tanzania's newest national park is indeed a rare botanical marvel, home to a full 350 species of vascular plants, including 45 varieties of terrestrial orchid, which erupt into a riotous wildflower display of breathtaking scale and diversity during the main rainy season of late November to April

Perched at around 2,600 metres (8,500 ft) between the rugged peaks of the Kipengere, Poroto and Livingstone Mountains, the well-watered volcanic soils of Kitulo support the largest and most important montane grassland community in Tanzania. One of the most important watersheds for the Great Ruaha River, Kitulo is also the first national park in tropical Africa to be gazetted largely for its floral significance – not only a multitude of orchids, but also the stunning yellow-orange red-hot poker and a variety of aloes, proteas, geraniums, giant lobelias, lilies and aster daisies, of which more than 30 species are endemic to southern Tanzania.

Big game is sparsely represented, though a few hardy mountain reedbuck and eland still roam the open grassland. But Kitulo – a botanist and hiker's paradise - is also highly alluring to birdwatchers. Tanzania's only population of the rare Denham's bustard is resident, alongside a breeding colony of the endangered blue swallow and such range-restricted species as mountain marsh widow, Njombe cisticola and Kipengere seedeater. Endemic species of butterfly, chameleon, lizard and frog further enhance the biological wealth of God's Garden.



Kitulo Plateau National Park

Size
442 sq km (172 sq miles)

Location
Southern Tanzania. The temporary park headquarters at Matamba are situated approximately 100km (60 miles) from Mbeya town.

Getting there
4x4 only. From Chimala, 78km east of Mbeya along the surfaced main road to Dar es Salaam, head south along the rough but spectacular dirt road - called Hamsini na Saba (57) after the number of hairpin bends along its length - to the temporary park headquarters at Matamba, from where it's another hour's drive to the plateau. Basic and erratic public transport is available.

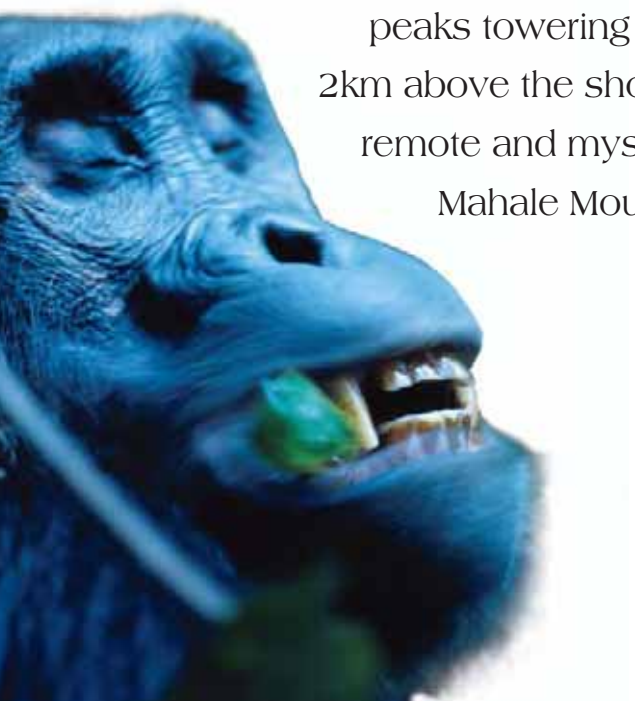
To do
Good hiking trails exist and will soon be developed into a formal trail system. Open walking across the grasslands to watch birds and wildflowers. Hill climbing on the neighbouring ranges. A half-day hike from the park across the Livingstone Mountains leads to the sumptuous Matema Beach on Lake Nyasa.

Best time
Wildflower displays peak between December and April. The sunnier months of September to November are more comfortable for hiking but less rewarding to botanists. Conditions are cold and foggy from June to August.

Accommodation
Mbeya is serviced by everything from luxury hotels to simple guesthouses, while two simple guesthouses also exist in Matamba. There is no accommodation in the park as yet, but very basic accommodation and meals are available at the adjacent Kitulo Farm. Three special campsites are planned within the park, catering to fully equipped campers. Two moderately priced church-run hostels are situated on Matema Beach.

Mahale

Set deep in the heart of the African interior, inaccessible by road and only 100km (60 miles) south of where Stanley uttered that immortal greeting "Doctor Livingstone, I presume", is a scene reminiscent of an Indian Ocean island beach idyll. Silky white coves hem in the azure waters of Lake Tanganyika, overshadowed by a chain of wild, jungle-draped peaks towering almost 2km above the shore: the remote and mysterious Mahale Mountains.



Mahale Mountains, like its northerly neighbour Gombe Stream, is home to some of Africa's last remaining wild chimpanzees: a population of roughly 800, habituated to human visitors by a Japanese research project founded in the 1960s. Tracking the chimps of Mahale is a magical experience. The guide's eyes pick out last night's nests - shadowy clumps high in a gallery of trees crowding the sky. Scraps of half-eaten fruit and fresh dung become valuable clues, leading deeper into the forest. Butterflies flit in the dappled sunlight. Then suddenly you are in their midst: preening each other's glossy coats in concentrated huddles, squabbling noisily, or bounding into the trees to swing effortlessly between the vines.

The area is also known as Nkungwe, after the park's largest mountain, held sacred by the local Tongwe people, and at 2,460 metres (8,069 ft) the highest of the six prominent points that make up the Mahale Range. And while chimpanzees are the star attraction, the slopes support a diverse forest fauna, including readily observed troops of red colobus, red-tailed and blue monkeys, and a kaleidoscopic array of colourful forest birds.

You can trace the Tongwe people's ancient pilgrimage to the mountain spirits, hiking through the montane rainforest belt – home to an endemic race of Angola colobus monkey - to high grassy ridges chequered with alpine bamboo. Then bathe in the impossibly clear waters of the world's longest, second-deepest and least-polluted freshwater lake – harbouring an estimated 1,000 fish species - before returning as you came, by boat.

Mahale Mountains National Park

Size
1,613 sq km (623 sq miles).

Location
Western Tanzania, bordering Lake Tanganyika.

Getting there
Charter flight from Arusha, Dar or Kigoma. Charter private or national park motorboat from Kigoma, three to four hours. Weekly steamer from Kigoma, seven hours, then hire a local fishing boat or arrange with park HQ for pickup in park boat, another one or two hours.

To do
Chimp tracking (allow two days); hiking; camping safaris; snorkelling; fish for your dinner.

Best time
Dry season (May-October) best for forest walks although no problem in the light rains of October/ November.

Accommodation
Two seasonal luxury tented camps. Two small resthouses, large campsite.

NOTE
The same rules for chimpanzee viewing at Gombe Stream apply at Mahale.

Manyara

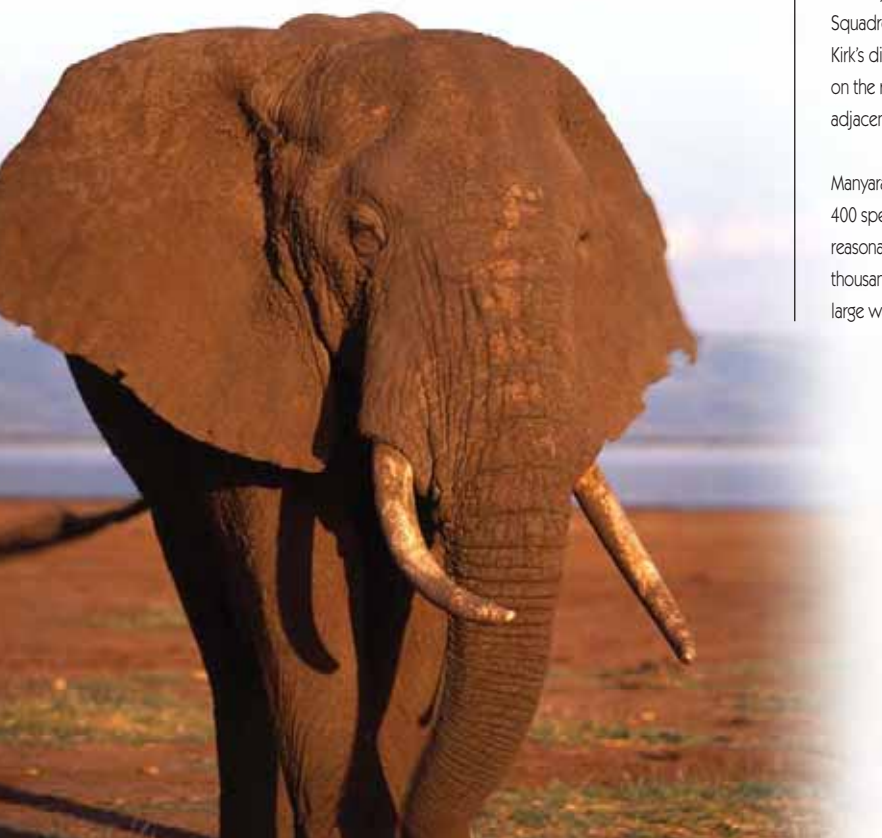
Stretching for 50km along the base of the rusty-gold 600-metre high Rift Valley escarpment, Lake Manyara is a scenic gem, with a setting extolled by Ernest Hemingway as "the loveliest I had seen in Africa".

The compact game-viewing circuit through Manyara offers a virtual microcosm of the Tanzanian safari experience. From the entrance gate, the road winds through an expanse of lush jungle-like groundwater forest where hundred-strong baboon troops lounge nonchalantly along the roadside, blue monkeys scamper nimbly between the ancient mahogany trees, dainty bushbuck tread warily through the shadows, and outsized forest hornbills honk cacophonously in the high canopy.

Contrasting with the intimacy of the forest is the grassy floodplain and its expansive views eastward, across the alkaline lake, to the jagged blue volcanic peaks that rise from the endless Maasai Steppes. Large buffalo, wildebeest and zebra herds congregate on these grassy plains, as do giraffes – some so dark in coloration that they appear to be black from a distance.

Inland of the floodplain, a narrow belt of acacia woodland is the favoured haunt of Manyara's legendary tree-climbing lions and impressively tusked elephants. Squadrons of banded mongoose dart between the acacias, while the diminutive Kirk's dik-dik forages in their shade. Pairs of klipspringer are often seen silhouetted on the rocks above a field of searing hot springs that steams and bubbles adjacent to the lakeshore in the far south of the park.

Manyara provides the perfect introduction to Tanzania's birdlife. More than 400 species have been recorded, and even a first-time visitor to Africa might reasonably expect to observe 100 of these in one day. Highlights include thousands of pink-hued flamingos on their perpetual migration, as well as other large waterbirds such as pelicans, cormorants and storks.



Lake Manyara National Park

Size
330 sq km (127 sq miles), of which up to 200 sq km (77 sq miles) is lake when water levels are high.

Location
In northern Tanzania. The entrance gate lies 1.5 hours (126km/80 miles) west of Arusha along a newly surfaced road, close to the ethnically diverse market town of Mto wa Mbu.

Getting there
By road, charter or scheduled flight from Arusha, en route to Serengeti and Ngorongoro Crater.

To do
Game drives, canoeing when the water levels is sufficiently high. Cultural tours, mountain bike tours, abseiling and forest walks on the escarpment outside the park.

Best time
Dry season (July-October) for large mammals; wet season (November-June) for bird watching, the waterfalls and canoeing.

Accommodation
One luxury treehouse-style camp, public bandas and campsites inside the park. One luxury tented camp and two lodges perched on the Rift Wall overlooking the lake; several guesthouses and campsites in nearby Mto wa Mbu.

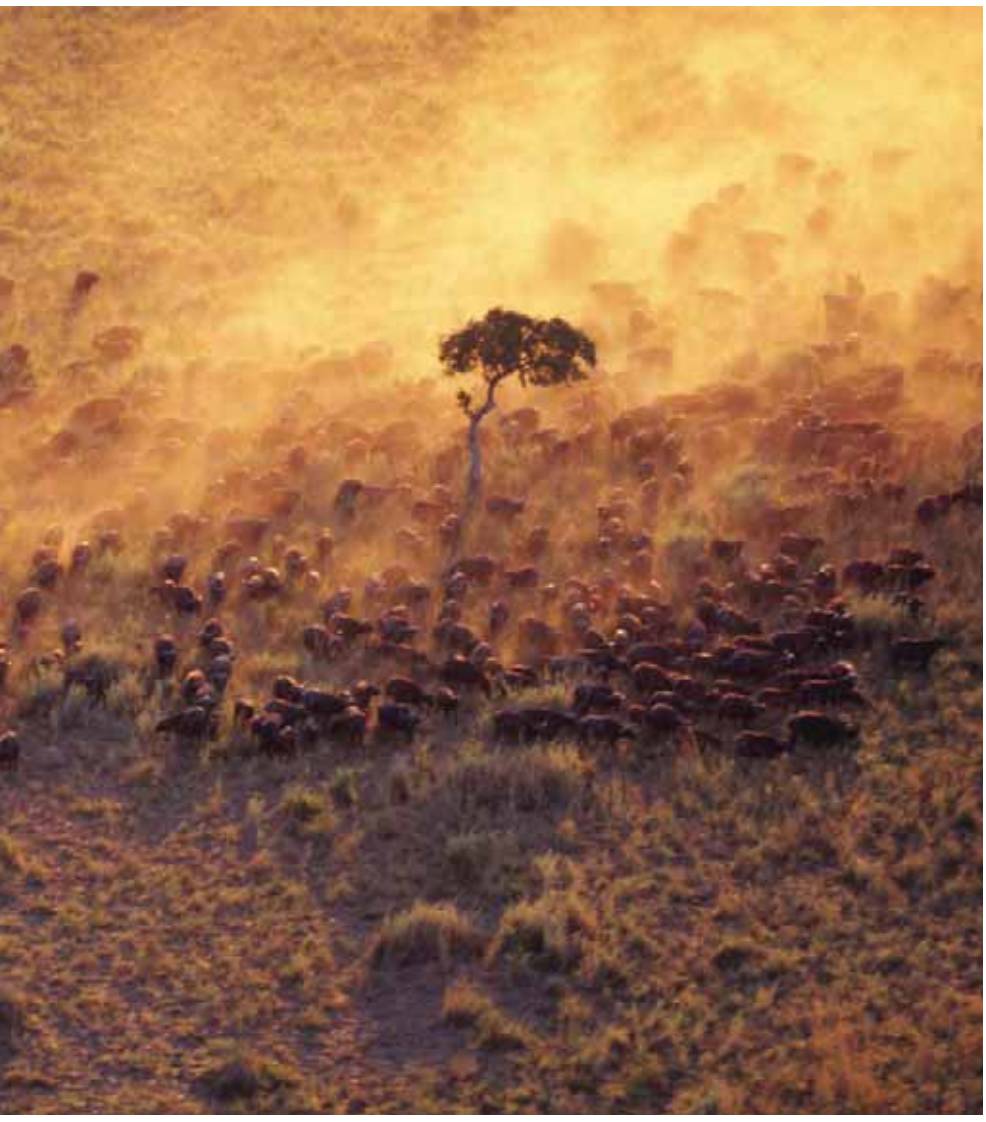
Mikumi

Swirls of opaque mist hide the advancing dawn. The first shafts of sun colour the fluffy grass heads rippling across the plain in a russet halo. A herd of zebras, confident in their camouflage at this predatory hour, pose like ballerinas, heads aligned and stripes merging in flowing motion.

Mikumi National Park abuts the northern border of Africa's biggest game reserve - the Selous – and is transected by the surfaced road between Dar es Salaam and Iringa. It is thus the most accessible part of a 75,000 square kilometre (47,000 square mile) tract of wilderness that stretches east almost as far as the Indian Ocean.

The open horizons and abundant wildlife of the Mkata Floodplain, the popular centrepiece of Mikumi, draw frequent comparisons to the more famous Serengeti Plains. Lions survey their grassy kingdom – and the zebra, wildebeest, impala and buffalo herds that migrate across it – from the flattened tops of termite mounds, or sometimes, during the rains, from perches high in the trees. Giraffes forage in the isolated acacia stands that fringe the Mkata River, islets of shade favoured also by Mikumi's elephants.

Criss-crossed by a good circuit of game-viewing roads, the Mkata Floodplain is perhaps the most reliable place in Tanzania for sightings of the powerful eland, the world's largest antelope. The equally impressive greater kudu and sable antelope haunt the miombo-covered foothills of the mountains that rise from the park's borders. More than 400 bird species have been recorded, with such colourful common residents as the lilac-breasted roller, yellow-throated longclaw and bateleur eagle joined by a host of European migrants during the rainy season. Hippos are the star attraction of the pair of pools situated 5km north of the main entrance gate, supported by an ever-changing cast of waterbirds.



Mikumi National Park

Size
3,230 sq km (1,250 sq miles), the fourth-largest park in Tanzania, and part of a much larger ecosystem centred on the uniquely vast Selous Game Reserve.

Location
283 km (175 miles) west of Dar es Salaam, north of Selous, and en route to Ruaha, Udzungwa and (for the intrepid) Katavi.

How to get there
A good surfaced road connects Mikumi to Dar es Salaam via Morogoro, a roughly 4 hour drive. Also road connections to Udzungwa, Ruaha and (dry season only) Selous. Charter flight from Dar es Salaam, Arusha or Selous. Local buses run from Dar to park HQ where game drives can be arranged.

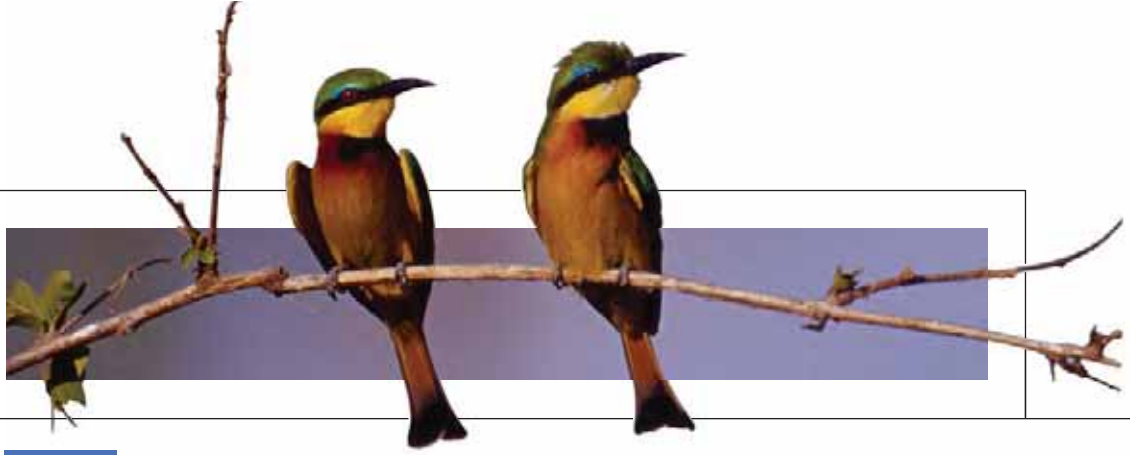
To do
Game drives and guided walks. Visit nearby Udzungwa or travel on to Selous or Ruaha.

Best time
Accessible year round.

Accommodation
Two lodges, two luxury tented camps, three campsites. Guest houses in Mikumi town on the park border.

Ruaha

The game viewing starts the moment the plane touches down. A giraffe races beside the airstrip, all legs and neck, yet oddly elegant in its awkwardness. A line of zebras parades across the runway in the giraffe's wake. In the distance, beneath a bulbous baobab tree, a few representatives of Ruaha's 10,000 elephants - the largest population of any East African national park – form a protective huddle around their young.



Second only to Katavi in its aura of untrammelled wilderness, but far more accessible, Ruaha protects a vast tract of the rugged, semi-arid bush country that characterises central Tanzania. Its lifeblood is the Great Ruaha River, which courses along the eastern boundary in a flooded torrent during the height of the rains, but dwindling thereafter to a scattering of precious pools surrounded by a blinding sweep of sand and rock. A fine network of game-viewing roads follows the Great Ruaha and its seasonal tributaries, where – during the dry season – impala, waterbuck and other antelopes risk their life for a sip of life-sustaining water. And the risk is considerable: not only from the prides of 20-plus lion that lord over the savannah, but also from the cheetahs that stalk the open grassland and the leopards that lurk in tangled riverine thickets. This impressive array of large predators is boosted by both striped and spotted hyena, as well as several conspicuous packs of the highly endangered African wild dog.

Ruaha's unusually high diversity of antelope is a function of its location, which is transitional to the acacia savannah of East Africa and the miombo woodland belt of Southern Africa. Grant's gazelle and lesser kudu occur here at the very south of their range, alongside the miombo-associated sable and roan antelope, and one of East Africa's largest populations of greater kudu, the park emblem, distinguished by the male's magnificent corkscrew horns. A similar duality is noted in the checklist of 450 birds: the likes of crested barbet – an attractive yellow-and-black bird whose persistent trilling is a characteristic sound of the southern bush – occur in Ruaha alongside central Tanzanian endemics such as the yellow-collared lovebird and ashy starling.

Ruaha National Park

Size
10,300 sq km (3,980 sq miles), Tanzania's 2nd biggest park.

Location
Central Tanzania, 128km (80 miles) west of Iringa.

Getting there
Scheduled and/or charter flights from Dar es Salaam, Selous, Serengeti, Arusha, Iringa and Mbeya. Year-round road access through Iringa from Dar es Salaam (about 10 hours) via Mikumi or from Arusha via Dodoma.

To do
Day walks or hiking safaris through untouched bush. Stone age ruins at Isimila, near Iringa, 120 km (75 miles) away, one of Africa's most important historical sites .

Best time
For predators and large mammals, dry season (mid-May-December); bird-watching, lush scenery and wildflowers, wet season (January-April). The male greater kudu is most visible in June, the breeding season.

Accommodation
Riverside lodge; three dry season tented camps; self-catering bandas, two campsites.

Rubondo

A pair of fish eagles guards the gentle bay, their distinctive black, white and chestnut feather pattern gleaming boldly in the morning sun. Suddenly, the birds toss back their heads in a piercing, evocative duet. On the sandbank below, a well-fed monster of a crocodile snaps to life, startled from its nap. It stampedes through the crunchy undergrowth, crashing into the water in front of the boat, invisible except for a pair of sentry-post eyes that peek menacingly above the surface to monitor our movements.

Rubondo Island is tucked in the southwest corner of Lake Victoria, the world's second-largest lake, an inland sea sprawling between Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. With nine smaller islands under its wing, Rubondo protects precious fish breeding grounds. Tasty tilapia form the staple diet of the yellow-spotted otters that frolic in the island's rocky coves, while rapacious Nile perch, some weighing more than 100kg, tempt recreational game fishermen seeking world record catches.

Rubondo is more than a water wonderland. Deserted sandy beaches nestle against a cloak of virgin forest, where dappled bushbuck move fleet yet silent through a maze of tamarinds, wild palms, and sycamore figs strung with a cage of trailing taproots. The shaggy-coated aquatic sitatunga, elsewhere the most elusive of antelopes, is remarkably easily observed, not only in the papyrus swamps it normally inhabits, but also in the forest interior.

Birds are everywhere. Flocks of African grey parrots – released onto the island after they were confiscated from illegal exporters – screech in comic discord as they flap furiously between the trees. The azure brilliance of a malachite kingfisher perched low on the reeds competes with the glamorous, flowing tail of a paradise flycatcher as it flits through the lakeshore forest. Herons, storks and spoonbills proliferate in the swampy lake fringes, supplemented by thousands of Eurasian migrants during the northern winter. Scents of wild jasmine, 40 different orchids and a smorgasbord of sweet, indefinable smells emanate from the forest.

Ninety percent of the park is humid forest; the remainder ranges from open grassland to lakeside papyrus beds. A number of indigenous mammal species - hippo, vervet monkey, genet and mongoose - share their protected habitat with introduced species such as chimpanzee, black-and-white colobus, elephant and giraffe, all of which benefit from Rubondo's inaccessibility.

Rubondo Island National Park

Size
240 sq km (93 sq miles).

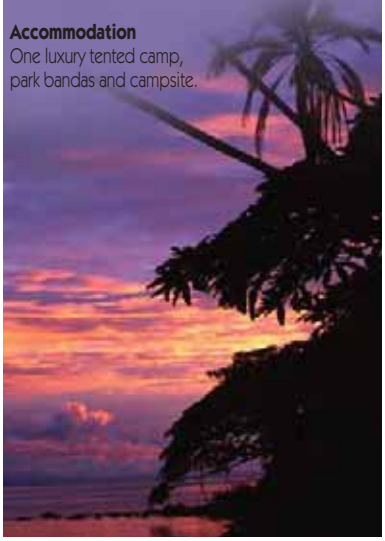
Location
Northwest Tanzania, 150 km (95 miles) west of Mwanza.

Getting there
Scheduled flights from Arusha, Lake Manyara, Serengeti and Mwanza in peak season, charter flights only in low season. By road from Mwanza and then boat transfer. Contact the Park for transport details.

To do
Walking safaris, boat excursions, sport fishing, chimpanzee treks, plans for canoe trips.

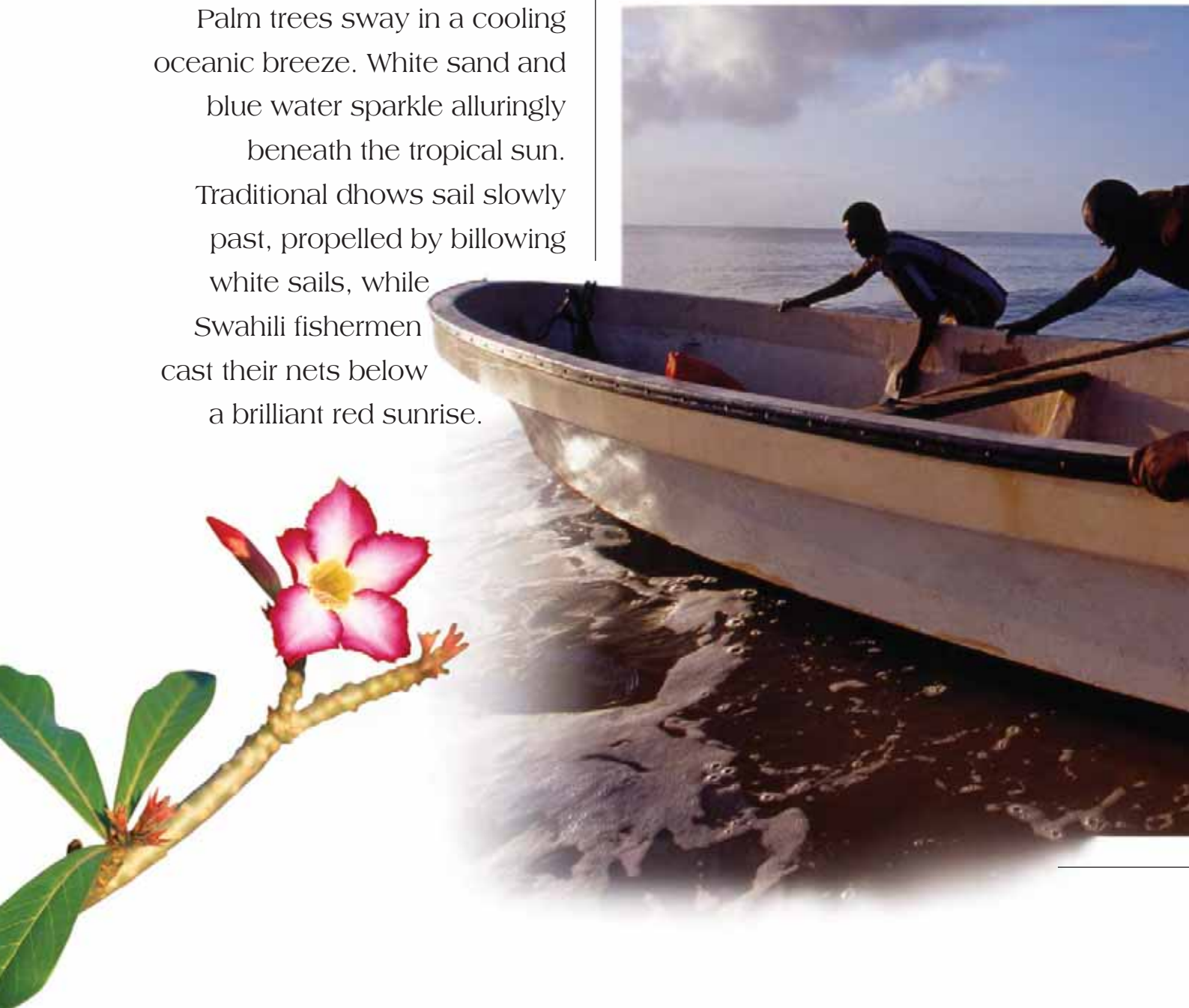
Best time
Dry season, June-August. Wildflowers and butterflies, wet season November-March. December- February best for migratory birds

Accommodation
One luxury tented camp, park bandas and campsite.



Saadani

Palm trees sway in a cooling oceanic breeze. White sand and blue water sparkle alluringly beneath the tropical sun. Traditional dhows sail slowly past, propelled by billowing white sails, while Swahili fishermen cast their nets below a brilliant red sunrise.



Saadani is where the beach meets the bush. The only wildlife sanctuary in East Africa to boast an Indian Ocean beachfront, it possesses all the attributes that make Tanzania's tropical coastline and islands so popular with European sun-worshippers. Yet it is also the one place where those idle hours of sunbathing might be interrupted by an elephant strolling past, or a lion coming to drink at the nearby waterhole!

Protected as a game reserve since the 1960s, Saadani was gazetted as a national park in 2002, when it was expanded to cover twice its former area. The reserve suffered greatly from poaching prior to the late 1990s, but recent years have seen a marked turnaround, due to a concerted clampdown on poachers, based on integrating adjacent villages into the conservation drive.

Today, a surprisingly wide range of grazers and primates is seen on game drives and walks, among them giraffe, buffalo, warthog, common waterbuck, reedbuck, hartebeest, wildebeest, red duiker, greater kudu, eland, sable antelope, yellow baboon and vervet monkey. Herds of up to 30 elephants are encountered with increasing frequency, and several lion prides are resident, together with leopard, spotted hyena and black-backed jackal. Boat trips on the mangrove-lined Wami River come with a high chance of sighting hippos, crocodiles and a selection of marine and riverine birds, including the mangrove kingfisher and lesser flamingo, while the beaches form one of the last major green turtle breeding sites on mainland Tanzania.

Saadani National Park

Size
1,062 sq km (415 sq miles)

Location
On the north coast, roughly 100km (60 miles) northwest of Dar es Salaam as the crow flies, and a similar distance southwest of the port of Tanga.

How to get there
Charter flight from Zanzibar or Dar with possibility of scheduled flights in the future. Thrice-weekly road shuttle from Dar, taking four hours in either direction. No road access from Dar along the coast – follow the surfaced Moshi road for 160km (100 miles), then 60km (36 miles) on dirt. Road access from Tanga and Pangani except after heavy rain. 4x4 required.

To do
Game drives and guided walks. Boat trips. Swimming. Visit Saadani fishing village, which lies within the reserve, where a collection of ruins pays testament to its 19th century heyday as a major trading port.

Best time
Generally accessible all-year round, but the access roads are sometimes impassable during April and May. The best game-viewing is in January and February and from June to August.

Accommodation
One luxury tented camp. Campsites planned.

Serengeti

A million wildebeest... each one driven by the same ancient rhythm, fulfilling its instinctive role in the inescapable cycle of life: a frenzied three-week bout of territorial conquests and mating; survival of the fittest as 40km (25 mile) long columns plunge through crocodile-infested waters on the annual exodus north; replenishing the species in a brief population explosion that produces more than 8,000 calves daily before the 1,000 km (600 mile) pilgrimage begins again.

Tanzania's oldest and most popular national park, the Serengeti is famed for its annual migration, when some six million hooves pound the open plains, as more than 200,000 zebra and 300,000 Thomson's gazelle join the wildebeest's trek for fresh grazing. Yet even when the migration is quiet, the Serengeti offers arguably the most scintillating game-viewing in Africa: great herds of buffalo, smaller groups of elephant and giraffe, and thousands upon thousands of eland, topi, kongoni, impala and Grant's gazelle.

The spectacle of predator versus prey dominates Tanzania's greatest park. Golden-maned lion prides feast on the abundance of plain grazers. Solitary leopards haunt the acacia trees lining the Seronera River, while a high density of cheetahs prowls the southeastern plains. Almost uniquely, all three African jackal species occur here, alongside the spotted hyena and a host of more elusive small predators, ranging from the insectivorous aardwolf to the beautiful serval cat.

But there is more to Serengeti than large mammals. Gaudy agama lizards and rock hyraxes scuffle around the surfaces of the park's isolated granite koppies. A full 100 varieties of dung beetle have been recorded, as have 500-plus bird species, ranging from the outsized ostrich and bizarre secretary bird of the open grassland, to the black eagles that soar effortlessly above the Lobo Hills.

As enduring as the game-viewing is the liberating sense of space that characterises the Serengeti Plains, stretching across sunburnt savannah to a shimmering golden horizon at the end of the earth. Yet, after the rains, this golden expanse of grass is transformed into an endless green carpet flecked with wildflowers. And there are also wooded hills and towering termite mounds, rivers lined with fig trees and acacia woodland stained orange by dust. Popular the Serengeti might be, but it remains so vast that you may be the only human audience when a pride of lions masterminds a siege, focussed unswervingly on its next meal.

Serengeti National Park

Size
14,763 sq km (5,700 sq miles).

Location
335km (208 miles) from Arusha, stretching north to Kenya and bordering Lake Victoria to the west.

Getting there
Scheduled and charter flights from Arusha, Lake Manyara and Mwanza. Drive from Arusha, Lake Manyara, Tarangire or Ngorongoro Crater.

To do
Hot air balloon safaris, Maasai rock paintings and musical rocks. Visit neighbouring Ngorongoro Crater, Olduvai Gorge, Ol Doinyo Lengai volcano and Lake Natron's flamingos.

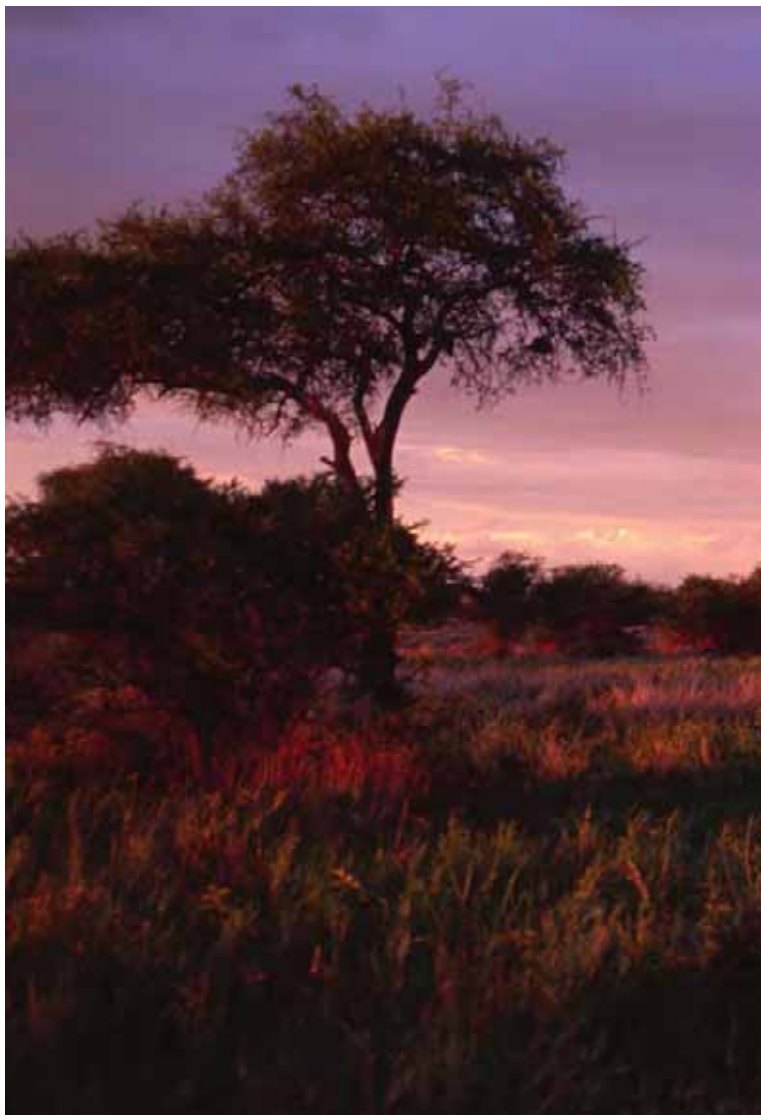
Best time
To follow the wildebeest migration, December-July. To see predators, June-October.

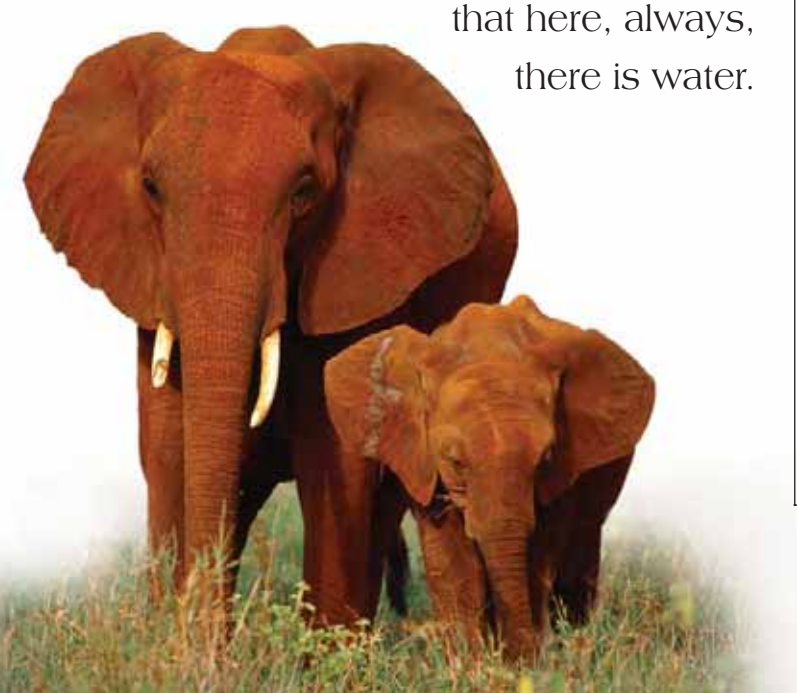
Accommodation
Four lodges, four luxury tented camps and camp sites scattered through the park; one luxury camp, a lodge and two tented camps just outside.

NOTE
The route and timing of the wildebeest migration is unpredictable. Allow at least three days to be assured of seeing them on your visit - longer if you want to see the main predators as well.

Tarangire

Day after day of cloudless skies. The fierce sun sucks the moisture from the landscape, baking the earth a dusty red, the withered grass as brittle as straw. The Tarangire River has shrivelled to a shadow of its wet season self. But it is choked with wildlife. Thirsty nomads have wandered hundreds of parched kilometres knowing that here, always, there is water.

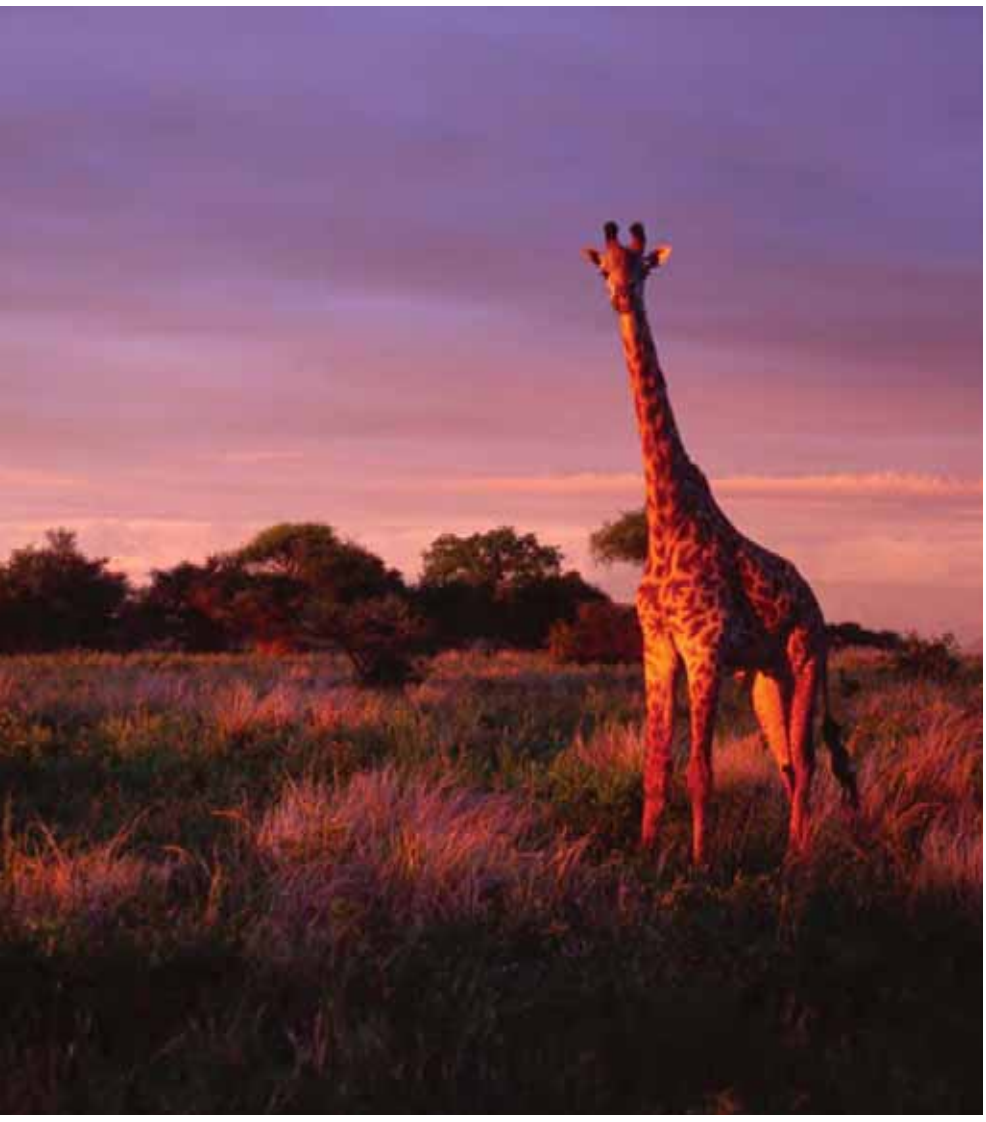




Herds of up to 300 elephants scratch the dry river bed for underground streams, while migratory wildebeest, zebra, buffalo, impala, gazelle, hartebeest and eland crowd the shrinking lagoons. It's the greatest concentration of wildlife outside the Serengeti ecosystem - a smorgasbord for predators – and the one place in Tanzania where dry-country antelope such as the stately fringe-eared oryx and peculiar long-necked gerenuk are regularly observed.

During the rainy season, the seasonal visitors scatter over a 20,000 sq km (12,500 sq miles) range until they exhaust the green plains and the river calls once more. But Tarangire's mobs of elephant are easily encountered, wet or dry. The swamps, tinged green year round, are the focus for 550 bird varieties, the most breeding species in one habitat anywhere in the world.

On drier ground you find the Kori bustard, the heaviest flying bird; the stocking-thighed ostrich, the world's largest bird; and small parties of ground hornbills blustering like turkeys. More ardent bird-lovers might keep an eye open for screeching flocks of the dazzlingly colourful yellow-collared lovebird, and the somewhat drabber rufous-tailed weaver and ashy starling – all endemic to the dry savannah of north-central Tanzania. Disused termite mounds are often frequented by colonies of the endearing dwarf mongoose, and pairs of red-and-yellow barbet, which draw attention to themselves by their loud, clockwork-like duetting. Tarangire's pythons climb trees, as do its lions and leopards, lounging in the branches where the fruit of the sausage tree disguises the twitch of a tail.



Tarangire National Park

Size
2,600 sq km (1,005 sq miles).

Location
118 km (75 miles) southwest of Arusha.

Getting there
Easy drive from Arusha or Lake Manyara following a surfaced road to within 7km (four miles) of the main entrance gate; can continue on to Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti. Charter flights from Arusha and the Serengeti.

To do
Guided walking safaris; day trips to Maasai and Barabaig villages, as well as to the hundreds of ancient rock paintings in the vicinity of Kolo on the Dodoma Road.

Best time
Year round but dry season (June - September) for sheer numbers of animals.

Accommodation
One lodge, one tented lodge, one luxury tented camp inside the park, another half-dozen exclusive lodges and tented camps immediately outside its borders. Camp sites in and around the park.

Udzungwa

Brooding and primeval, the forests of Udzungwa seem positively enchanted: a verdant refuge of sunshine-dappled glades enclosed by 30-metre (100 foot) high trees, their buttresses layered with fungi, lichens, mosses and ferns.

Udzungwa is the largest and most biodiverse of a chain of a dozen large forest-swathed mountains that rise majestically from the flat coastal scrub of eastern Tanzania. Known collectively as the Eastern Arc Mountains, this archipelago of isolated massifs has also been dubbed the African Galapagos for its treasure-trove of endemic plants and animals, most familiarly the delicate African violet. Udzungwa alone among the ancient ranges of the Eastern Arc has been accorded national park status. It is also unique within Tanzania in that its closed-canopy forest spans altitudes of 250 metres (820 feet) to above 2,000 metres (6,560 ft) without interruption.

Not a conventional game viewing destination, Udzungwa is a magnet for hikers. An excellent network of forest trails includes the popular half-day ramble to Sanje Waterfall, which plunges 170 metres (550 feet) through a misty spray into the forested valley below. The more challenging two-night Mwanihana Trail leads to the high plateau, with its panoramic views over surrounding sugar plantations, before ascending to Mwanihana peak, the second-highest point in the range.

Ornithologists are attracted to Udzungwa for an avian wealth embracing more than 400 species, from the lovely and readily-located green-headed oriole to more than a dozen secretive Eastern Arc endemics. Four bird species are peculiar to Udzungwa, including a forest partridge first discovered in 1991 and more closely related to an Asian genus than to any other African fowl. Of six primate species recorded, the Iringa red colobus and Sanje Crested Mangabey both occur nowhere else in the world – the latter, remarkably, remained undetected by biologists prior to 1979. Undoubtedly, this great forest has yet to reveal all its treasures: ongoing scientific exploration will surely add to its diverse catalogue of endemics.

Udzungwa Mountains National Park

Size
1,990 sq km (770 sq miles).

Location
Five hours (350 km/215 miles) from Dar es Salaam; 65 kms (40 miles) southwest of Mikumi.

Getting there
Drive from Dar es Salaam or Mikumi National Park.

To do
From a two-hour hike to the waterfall to camping safaris. Combine with nearby Mikumi or en route to Ruaha.

Best time
Possible year round although slippery in the rains. The dry season is June-October before the short rains but be prepared for rain anytime.

Accommodation
Camping inside the park. Bring all food and supplies. Two modest but comfortable lodges with en-suite rooms within 1km of the park entrance.

The Role of the National Parks

The primary role of Tanzania' national parks is conservation. The 14 national parks, many of which form the core of a much larger protected ecosystem, have been set aside to preserve the country's rich natural heritage, and to provide secure breeding grounds where its fauna and flora can thrive, safe from the conflicting interests of a growing human population.

The existing park system protects a number of internationally recognised bastions of biodiversity and World Heritage sites, thereby redressing the balance for those areas of the country affected by deforestation, agriculture and urbanisation. The gazetting of Saadani and Kitulo National Parks in 2002 expanded this network to include coastal and montane habitats formerly accorded a lower level of protection. Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) is also currently acquiring further land to expand certain parks, and to raise the status of traditional migration corridors connecting protected areas.

By choosing to visit Tanzania you are supporting a developing country's extraordinary investment in the future. In spite of population pressures, Tanzania has dedicated more than 42,000 square kilometres to national parks. Including other reserves, conservation areas and marine parks, Tanzania has accorded some form of formal protection to more than one-third of its territory – a far higher proportion than most of the world's wealthier nations.

TOURISM

Tourism provides valuable revenue used to support the conservation work of the national parks, as well as wildlife research, and the education and livelihood of local communities. In addition, tourism helps to generate international awareness of conservation issues, while the physical presence of tourists can help deter illegal poaching activity, assisting the park rangers with their game management work.

But TANAPA has resisted the temptation to cash in on the short term gains of mass tourism. Understanding our responsibility – to Tanzania, and to the world - in the conservation and management of a global resource, we are committed to low impact, sustainable visitation to protect the environment from irreversible damage while creating a first class ecotourism destination.

Human activity is closely monitored and all development strictly regulated. Buildings in the parks must be unobtrusive and waste disposal is carefully controlled. Park visitors and facilities are widely distributed to prevent harassment of animals and to minimise the human imprint on the environment. Even in Tanzania's most popular park, the Serengeti, more than 7,000 square kilometres - almost half the park's area - remains a wilderness zone with no roads.

THE LOCAL PEOPLE

Guardianship of this rich resource, however, relies on the goodwill of the parks' neighbours. TANAPA is working hard to ensure that local communities have a sense of ownership and a vested interest in the future of the parks by sharing the rewards of conservation and delivering tangible benefits. A percentage of park revenues is used to assist community development initiatives, such as schools, health dispensaries, water schemes and roads. Villagers are encouraged to develop cultural tourism projects to cultivate their own financial returns from park visitors. Many locals are employed within the parks by lodges and tour operators - and by TANAPA, particularly in the fight against poachers who desire to steal from the parks for profit or subsistence.

Poaching involves not only the commercial hunting of elephants and rhinoceroses for ivory and rhino horn, but also subsistence activities such as honey collection, illegal fishing and hunting for the pot, felling trees for construction or firewood, and picking traditional medicinal plants that have become scarce in unprotected areas. When villagers depend on the park for employment, and witness the community benefits from the presence of a park, they are more likely to defend the protected area and to report poaching. TANAPA works with communities to teach sustainable environmental management, assist with tree planting, establish nurseries, and promote cultural, as well as wildlife, conservation.

LOOKING AHEAD

The future depends on those who will inherit the parks. TANAPA is taking the lead in educating local people, providing study materials and teacher training for schools, and showing conservation videos in Swahili in villages. Schools and community groups are offered free visits to the parks to demonstrate the importance of preserving these habitats.

The support of research projects is an important facet of TANAPA's commitment to the future. Tanzania's chimpanzees are the subject of the longest-running study of its kind in the world. Scientists working in Tanzania's parks continue to find hitherto undiscovered species of butterflies, birds, beetles and plants. And regular surveys are undertaken to monitor the distribution and number of animals, test water quality, identify disease outbreaks, and check invasion by exotic species.

The national parks are a lifeline for animals that would otherwise face extinction by human hands. They offer refuge to many endangered and vulnerable species, safeguard shrinking habitats, and provide protected breeding sanctuaries in which threatened species can recover. With everyone's support, these vital ecosystems will be preserved for the benefit of future generations.

Travel Tips

LANGUAGE

English is widely spoken but a few words of Swahili can be useful and will be appreciated greatly by locals.

MONEY

Major foreign currencies - particularly US$ - and travellers cheques are accepted and are convertible at banks and bureaux de changes in the main towns and tourist areas. Credit cards are not widely accepted and carry poor exchange rates. Some banks in Arusha, Dar es Salaam and Moshi offer ATM facilities against international credit cards, but ATMs are not available elsewhere. Visitors may be expected to pay in foreign currency for game parks. Don't change money in the street.

HEALTH

Yellow fever vaccination is no longer compulsory. Malaria is endemic but is preventable: use insect repellent, cover up at sundown, sleep under a mosquito net and take anti-malaria prophylactics as advised by your doctor. Bring prescription medicines, spare glasses, contact lenses and solution as well as sunscreen, a first aid kit, cream for bites/stings and diarrhoea remedy. Drink only boiled or bottled water, bottled or canned drinks, avoid ice cubes and salads. HIV/Aids is widespread, especially in the main tourist areas. (See Mt. Kilimanjaro section for altitude sickness advice.)

CLIMATE

Generally dry and hot with cool nights/mornings June-October; short rains November to mid-December; long rains March-May but the seasons can vary. The coastal strip is hot and humid all year round. Temperatures on Mount Kilimanjaro and Meru drop to below freezing.

CLOTHES

Pack lightweight, washable clothes plus a sweater for early morning game drives, as well as a sun hat, sunglasses and sunscreen. Long sleeves and trousers in light-coloured fabrics help discourage insect bites. You can buy clothes in Dar es Salaam and Arusha.

Shorts for women are acceptable (but not too short!). Women should carry a wrap to cover legs in the villages and towns as revealing clothes can cause offence, especially in Zanzibar and Moslem areas. On the beach and within the confines of beach hotels normal swimwear is acceptable (but not nudity).

For climbing on Kilimanjaro or Meru, take thermal underwear, light layers, sweater, rain jacket, good socks and sturdy boots.

ON SAFARI

Distances in Tanzania are vast, and travel by road can be wearing. Plan to spend more time in fewer parks. You'll see more and won't return home exhausted.

Keep your distance from animals and be quiet to avoid distressing the wildlife. Follow instructions of rangers or guides. Don't leave your vehicle in the parks except in designated places. Keep to recognised tracks to avoid damaging vegetation.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Bring film (especially slide film) and batteries for your camera with you. Protect your cameras from dust and keep equipment and film cool. It is courteous to ask permission before photographing local people. If you intend to take a lot of people pictures, be sure to bring an instant camera with you so that you can leave a picture with the people you photograph.

INSURANCE

Take out travel insurance to cover loss of baggage or valuables, personal accident and medical expenses.

TIPPING
Not obligatory, but a tip for exceptional service (max 10%) will be appreciated. $10 - $15 per day for driver or tour guide. An excessive tip can make it difficult for the next customer.

TIME
3 hrs + GMT.

ELECTRICITY
230V, but power failures, surges and troughs are common. Bring a universal adaptor and a torch (flashlight) or headlamp.

CAR HIRE
Self-drive vehicles are available mainly for local running or tarmac use. 4x4 vehicles for safaris usually have to be hired with a driver.

DRIVING
On the left. An international licence is required. Plan long safaris carefully, ensuring your vehicle is road worthy with two spare tyres, an operational jack and tool kit. Carry extra fuel, spares and water.

TRAVEL WITH CHILDREN
Tanzanians love children and are especially helpful to mothers. However, canned baby foods, powdered milk and disposable nappies may not be available outside major towns.

VISAS
Check current requirements with the nearest Tanzanian High Commission, embassy or consulate, or your travel agent. Visas, if required, can be bought on arrival at all international airports and overland borders.

SECURITY
Tanzania is a generally safe country, but don't invite temptation. Keep an eye on your belongings. Don't walk in the towns or cities at night - take a taxi. Don't carry cameras or large amounts of cash; beware of pickpockets. Use hotel safety deposit boxes to safeguard valuables and obtain a receipt. Leave valuable jewellery at home.

GIFTS
Don't indiscriminately hand out pens, money and sweets like a wealthy Western Santa Claus - it just encourages begging. As anywhere, gifts should be given as a true expression of friendship, appreciation or thanks.

SHOPPING
The tourist areas and hotels sell a wide range of souvenirs, jewellery and trinkets. Don't be afraid to haggle at roadside curio stalls.

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Photography: David Pluth, pix@fotografx.biz
Graphic Design: Steven Dutton, steven@fotografx.biz
Text: Philip Briggs © 2004, philari@hixnet.co.za
Translations: *De*/Stefan Bosshard; *Esp*/Déborah Zurfluh-Poradosú; *Fr*/Nicolas Michel

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